

In name of Crist, criede this olde Britoun,
Dame Hermengyld, yif me my sighte agayn!
This lady weex affrayed of the soun,
Lest that hir housbonde, shortly for to sayn,
Wolde hire for Jhesu Cristes love han slayn;
Til Custance made hire boold, and bad hire wirche
The wyl of Crist, as doghter of his chirche.

The constable weex abashed of that sight,
And seyde, What amounteth al this fare?
Custance answerde, Sire, it is Cristes myght,
That helpeth folk out of the feendes snare.
And so ferforth she gan oure lay declare,
That she the constable, er that it were eve,
Converteth, and on Crist maketh hym believe.

This constable was nothing lord of this place
Of which I speke, ther he Custance fond,
But kepte it strongly, many wyntres space,
Under Alla, kyng of al Northhumbrelond,
That was ful wys, and worthy of his bond
Agayn the Scottes, as men may wel heere;
But turne I wole agayn to my mateere.

SATHAN, that evere us waiteth to bigile,
Saugh of Custance al hire perfeccioun,
And caste anon how he myghte quite hir
while,
And made a yong knyght, that dwelte in that toun,
Love hire so hoot, of foul affeccioun,
That verrailly hym thoughte he sholde spille
But he of hire myghte ones have his wille.

He woweth hire, but it availleth noght,
She wolde do no synne, by no weye;
And for despit, he compassed in his thoght
To maken hire on shameful deeth to deye.
He wayteth whan the constable was aweye
And pryvely, upon a nyght he crepte
In Hermengyldes chambre whil she slepte.

Mery, forwaked in hire orisouns,
Slepeth Custance, and Hermengyld also.
This knyght, thurgh Sathanas temptaciouns,
All softly is to the bed ygo,
And kittle the throte of Hermengyld atwo,
And leyde the bloody knyf by dame Custance,
And wente his wey, ther God yewe hym meschance!

Soone after com' th this constable boomagayn,
And eek Alla, that kyng was of that lond,
And saugh his wyf despitously yslayn,
For which ful ofte he weepe and wroong his hond,
And in the bed the bloody knyf he fond
By dame Custance; alas! what myghte she seye?
For verray wo hir wit was al aweye.

To kyng Alla was toold al this meschance
And eek the tyme, and where, and in what wise
That in a ship was founden dame Custance,
As heerbi for that ye han herd devyse.
The kynges herte of pitee gan agryse,
Whan he saugh so benigne a creature
Falle in disce, and in mysaventure:

for as the lomb toward his deeth is broght,
So stant this innocent before the kyng;
This false knyght that hath this tresoun wrought,
Berth hire on hond that she hath doon thys thyng;
But natheless, ther was greet moornyng
Among the peple, and seyn, They kan nat gesse
That she had doon so greet a wikkednesse:

for they han seyn hire evere so vertuous,
And lovyng Hermengyld right as hir lyf,
Of this baar witness everich in that hous,
Save he that Hermengyld slow with his knyf.
This gentil kyng hath caught a greet motyf
Of this witness, and thoghte he wolde enquer
Depper in this, a trouthe for to lere.

Alas! Custance, thou hast no champion,
Ne fighte kanstow noght, so weylaway!
But he that starf for our redempcioun,
And boond Sathan, and yet lith ther he lay,
So be thy stronge champion this day;
for, but if Crist open myracle kithe,
Withouthen gilt thou shalt be slayn as swithe.

She sit hire down on knees and thus she sayde:
Immortal God that savedest Susanne
fro false blame, and thou, merciful mayde,
Mary I meene, doghter to Seint Anne,
Bifore whos child angesles synge Osanne,
If I be giltyes of this felonye
My socour be, or elles shal I dye!

Have ye nat seyn som tyme a pale face
Among a prees, of hym that hath be lad
Toward his deeth, wheras hym gat no grace,
And swich a colour in his face hath had,
Men myghte knowe his face, that was bistad,
Amonges alle the faces in that route?
So stant Custance, and looketh hire aboute.

QUEENES, lyvyng in prosperitee,
Duchesses, and ye ladyes everichone,
Haveth som routhe on hire adversitee;
An emperoures doghter stant allone.
She hath no wight to whom to make hir mone.
O blood roial, that stondest in this drede,
fer been thy freendes at thy grete nede!

ALLA, kyng, hath swich compassioun,
As gentil herte is fulfild of pitee,
That from his eyen ran the water down.
Now hastily do fecche a book, quod he,
And if this knyght wol sweren how that she
This womman slow, yet wol we us avyse
Whom that we wole that shal been our justise.

A Briton book, written with Evaungiles
Was fet, and on this book he swoor anon
She gilty was, and in the meene whiles
An hand hym smoot upon the nekke-boon,
That down he fil atones as a stoon,
And bothe his eyen broste out of his face
In sighte of every body in that place.

A voys was herd in general audience,
And seyde, Thou hast desclaudred, giltyeles,
The doghter of hooly chirche in heigh presence;
Thus hastou doon, and yet holde I my pees.
Of this mervaille agast was al the prees;
As mazed folk they stoden everichone,
for drede of wreche, save Custance allone.

Greet was the drede, and eek the repentance,
Of hem that hadden wronge suspicioun
Upon this sely, innocent Custance;
And for this miracle, in conclusioun,
And by Custances mediacioun,
The kyng, and many another in that place,
Converted was, thanked be Cristes grace!

This false knyght was slayn for his untrouthe
By juggement of Alla, hastily;
And yet Custance hadde of his deeth greet routhe;
And after this Jhesus, of his mercy,
Made Alla wedden, ful solemnely,
This hooly mayden, that is so bright and sheene;
And thus hath Crist ymaad Custance a queene.

BUT who was woful, if I shal nat lye,
Of this wedding but Donegild, and na mo,
The kynges mooder, ful of tirannye?
hir thoughte hir cursed herte brast atwo;
She wolde noght hir sone had do so.
hir thoughte a despit that he sholde take
So strange a creature unto his make.

NE list nat of the chaf, nor of the stree
Maken so long a tale as of the corn.
What sholde I tellen of the roialtee
At mariage, or which cours goth biforn,
Who bloweth in a trumpe, or in an horn?
The fruyt of every tale is for to seye,
They etc, and drynke, and daunce, and synge, and
pleye.

They goon to bedde, as it was skile and right,
for thogh that wyves be ful hooly thynges,
They moste take in pacience at nyght
Swiche manere necessities as been plesynges
To folk that han wywedded hem with rynges,
And leye a lite hir hoolynesse aside,
As for the tyme; it may no bet bitide.

On hire he gat a knave/childe anon,
And to a bisschop, and his constable eke,
He took his wyf to kepe, whan he is gon
To Scotlandward, his foomen for to seke.
Now faire Custance, that is so humble and meke,
So longe is goon with childe, til that stille
She halt hire chambre, abyding Cristes wille.

The tyme is come a knave/childe she beer,
Mauricius at the fontstoon they hym calle.
This constable dooth forth come a messaenge,
And wroot unto his kyng, that cleped was Alle,
how that this blisful tidying is bifalle,
And othere tidynges spedeful for to seye.
He taketh the lettre, and forth he gooth his weye.

THIS messenger, to doon his avantage,
Unto the kynges mooder rideth swithe,
And salueth hire ful faire in his langage;
Madame, quod he, ye may be glad and blithe,
And thanketh God an hundred thousand sithe,
My lady queene hath child, withouthen doute,
To joye and blisse of al this regne aboute.

Lo, heere the lettres seled of this thyng,
That I moot bere with al the haste I may;
If ye wol aught unto youre sone the kyng,
I am youre servant, bothe nyght and day.
Donegild answerde, As now, at this tyme, nay;
But heere al nyght I wol thou take thy reste,
Tomorwe wol I seye thee what me leste.

THIS messenger drank sadly ale and wyn,
And stolen were his lettres pryvely,
Out of his box, whil he sleep as a swyn;
And countrefeted was ful subtilly
Another lettre, wrought ful synfully,
Unto the kyng droght of this mateere
fro his constable, as ye shal after heere.

The lettre spak, The queene delivered was
Of so horrible a feendly creature,
That in the castel noon so hardy was
That any while dorste ther endure.
The mooder was an elf, by aventure
Ycomen, by charmes or by sorcerie,
And everich wight hateth hir compaignye.

Was this kyng whan he this lettre had seyn,
But to no wight he tolde his sorwes soore,
But of his owene hand he wroot agayn,
Welcome the sonde of Crist for evermoore
To me, that am now lerned in his loore;
Lord, welcome be thy lust and thy plesaunce
My lust I putte al in thyn ordinaunce.

Kepeth this child, al be it foul or feir,
And eek my wyf unto myn boomcomynge;
Crist, whan hym list, may sende me an heir
Moore agreable than this to my likynge.
This lettre he selet, pryvely wepyng,
Which to the messenger was take soone,
And forth he gooth; ther is na moore to doone.

MESSAGER, fulfild of dronkenesse!
Strong is thy breeth, thy lymes faltren ay,
And thou biwreyest alle secrenesse.
Thy mynde is lorn, thou janglest as a jay;
Thy face is turned in a newe array!
Ther dronkenesse regneth in any route,
Ther is no conseil hyd, withouthen doute.

DONEGILD! I ne have noon Englissh
digne
Unto thy malice and thy tirannye,
And therefore to the feend I thee resigne,
Lat hym enditen of thy traitorye!
fy, mannysh, fy! O nay, by God, I lye,
fy, feendlych spirit, for I dar wel telle,
Thogh thou heere walke, thy spirit is in helle!